

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM: A RELIGIOUS WAR?

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This SRP is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree. The U.S. Army War College is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, (215) 662-5606. The Commission on Higher Education is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

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U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 30 MAR 2007		2. REPORT TYPE Strategy Research Project		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2006 to 00-00-2007	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Global War On Terrorism A Religious War?				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Laurence Dobrot				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5050				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT See attached.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 27	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Lt Col Laurence Andrew Dobrot
TITLE: The Global War On Terrorism: A Religious War?
FORMAT: Strategy Research Project
DATE: 31 March 2007 WORD COUNT: 8338 PAGES: 28
KEY TERMS: Caliphate, Root Cause, Democracy, Revolutionary, Islam, Muslim
CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

The U.S. has been actively engaged in prosecuting the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) since September 2001. However, after five years of national effort that has included the loss of over 3,000 service members in combat operations, many question whether the US strategy is working and whether the US understands how to combat an enemy motivated by a radical revolutionary religious ideology. This Strategy Research Project (SRP) reviews the pertinent cultural history and background of Islam and then posits three root causes of this conflict: the lack of wealth-sharing in Islamic countries, resentment of Western exploitation of Islamic countries and a US credibility gap within the Islamic community. Following this discussion of root causes, this analysis compares the Ends, Ways and Means of the US Strategy for Combating Terrorism with that of terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda. This SRP concludes that the United States is not achieving its long term strategic objectives in the GWOT. It then recommends that US strategy focus on the root causes of Islamic hostility. Accordingly, the United States should combat radical Islam from within the Islamic community by consistently supporting the efforts of moderate Islamic nations to build democratic institutions that are acceptable in Islamic terms.

THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM: A RELIGIOUS WAR?

War was declared on the United States on 23 August 1996 in a *fatwa* (an Islamic religious decree) issued by Osama bin Laden.¹ This war, unlike any previous US conflict, is one in which our adversary's motivation and objectives are seemingly based on religion and divine predestination. On 22 February 1998 bin Laden issued a second *fatwa* calling on every Muslim to kill Americans and their allies whether they be civilian or military.² In August of the same year al Qaeda operatives carried out two simultaneous attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania leaving over 220 people dead and scores injured.³ From al Qaeda's point of view, these attacks constitute a campaign plan in a religious war to defend Islam. Further, al Qaeda believes that America started the war against Islam⁴ long before the hijacked airliners slammed into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001.

The US response to the 2001 attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center was a declaration of war against terrorists and terrorism. In February 2003, the Bush Administration published the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism which was recently updated in September 2006. But is terrorism truly the threat. Or is the threat something different? The American Heritage Dictionary defines terrorism as:

The unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence by a person or an organized group against people or property with the intention of intimidating or coercing societies or governments, often for ideological or political reasons.⁵

This definition indicates that terrorism is a tactic employed as a means to an ends. Declaring war against a tactic may expediently yield some short term benefits. However, denying the enemy his primary tactic arguably does not address the long-term root causes of the problem. Al Qaeda and bin Laden are using the tenets of Islam to justify a holy war, or *jihad*, against the US. Islamic religious ideology is motivating al Qaeda's terrorist activities and uniting disparate Islamic groups in their shared belief that the US is their enemy. The tactics these groups have employed to date are primarily terror-based. However, their terrorist activities are primarily an asymmetric adaptation to sustain hostilities despite their limited military resources and capabilities.

The 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism addresses the security challenge posed by terrorism by specifying two macro-strategic goals. The near-term goal is to destroy the larger al Qaeda network.⁶ Indeed, the US and its coalition partners have been relatively successful at killing, capturing and significantly degrading the al Qaeda network.⁷ Unfortunately, al Qaeda resembles the Hydra menace of Greek mythology:⁸ For every al Qaeda member

removed from the network, two more take their place. The second and long-term goal of the US strategy is to create a global environment inhospitable to violent extremists and all who support them.⁹ The way to achieve this strategic goal is to build democratic institutions within Islamic countries. These more enlightened governments will provide hope for the future, to millions of Muslims who currently do not support the tactics of the violent extremists, but who nevertheless desire a better future for themselves and their families. The success of our efforts in this quest will be much harder to assess. But we must consider a key question that arises relating to US efforts to build democracies: “Does the average Muslim on the street believe US actions are legitimate and in their best interests?” Arguably, US efforts to communicate the values of democracy and freedom are running headlong into 1600 years of Islamic culture and the underlying Islamic fear of reverting back to the conditions of pre-Islamic Arabia.¹⁰ To properly frame this strategic issue, we must understand our strategy in the context of Islamic culture. This background will provide some insight into how and why militant Islamists view US strategy and policy the way they do.

Defining the Enemy and the Problem

First of all, we need to acknowledge that we are engaged in an ideological conflict. Globally, some 1.3 billion people believe in Islam.¹¹ Fundamental to the Islamic faith is the belief that Islam is superior to all other religions; God has chosen and provided Muslims with divine guidance for all of mankind.¹² Within Islam, an undetermined number of believers see Islam as the one true religion for the entire world; they believe that Islam should be spread by force to bring peace to the world. But these statistics and Islamic tenets do not, in themselves, seem to identify our current menace. The enemy can best be identified through a description of the various levels of commitment among believers to the ideological cause and then categorized into three separate – yet overlapping – groups.

At the “extreme violent” end of the spectrum are what Stephen Lambert, in his book “Y,” terms the Revolutionary Islamic Vanguard.¹³ He describes them as relatively small groups of individuals who organize, train for, and carry out violent acts with the objective of establishing a new unified Islamic state. This is the most dangerous group. Its members have interpreted the Quran in the most literal and selective manner to institutionalize their legitimacy within the rest of the Islamic world. As an Islamic “Vanguard,” they are the ones willing to carry out the attacks on US Embassies, the USS Cole, the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and numerous other targets throughout the world. Lambert goes on to suggest that they have not hijacked Islam, they are in fact religious purists who believe they are following examples set by Muhammad and

his companions.¹⁴ This Vanguard can be further sub-divided into the two core Islamic sects of Sunnis and Shiites. The most familiar of these violent sub-groups is the al Qaeda network lead by Osama bin Laden. Al Qaeda's ideology derives from the Sunni sect of the puritanical fundamentalist *Salafist* teaching. This sect believes in the orthodoxy of Islam as taught through the Saudi Arabian sponsored *Wahhabi* schools.¹⁵ *Wahhabism* was founded in Arabia by the scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791 AD). This sect encourages a return to the "fundamentals" of Islam, as revealed in the Quran and in the life of the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁶ What is unique about al Qaeda is that it advocates *Takfirism* – a doctrine that requires elimination of non-believers, no matter their background or religion.¹⁷ Al Qaeda and its splinter groups are composed mostly of Arabs who joined the Mujihideen fighters of Afghanistan,¹⁸ where they contributed significantly to expelling the Soviet invaders in the 1980s. By way of contrast, such Shiite groups as Hezbollah have focused primarily on the local Middle East area, predominately on the Israeli and Palestinian conflict.¹⁹

The second group is larger than the Vanguard and much harder to identify. Unlike the Vanguard, they are not as committed to the ideological cause and have not crossed the line into violent action. However, they are willing to support – both financially and morally – the goals of the Vanguard. This group is spread throughout the world with large numbers living in western countries, where they are able to earn money to help provide financial support to the Vanguard.²⁰ This group could be described as individual "non-violent supporters."

The third and last group that can be considered part of the enemy camp is made up of nation states and large organizations that either supports the Vanguard or its objectives. Once again, there is a distinct division between the Islamic sects of the Sunnis and the Shiites. Saudi Arabia is the largest supporter of Sunni groups. As a nation, however, it claims to no longer support al Qaeda as it did during the Afghan-Soviet conflict of the 1980s.²¹ Besides oil, Saudi Arabia's largest export is its *Wahhabi* brand of Sunni Islam; Saudis have contributed more than \$70B²² to build mosques and provide fundamentalist teaching materials. Many of the *madrasses* (religious schools)²³ in Pakistan were built with Saudi funds during the Afghan-Soviet conflict; they still provide training to many who become part of the Vanguard. In addition, there appears to be a split within the Saudi royal family on the issue of support for bin Laden.²⁴ Some in the family still believe in the ideological goals pursued by bin Laden and provide him financial support. On the other side, Iran is believed to be the primary supporter of the Shiite groups, among which Hezbollah²⁵ is the better known group. The Shiite groups have focused on expanding Shiite influence in the region and continuing support for the Palestinians in their

struggle with Israel. Since the removal of Saddam, the Shiite, under the leadership of the anti-US cleric, Muqtada al Sadr, have become principal players in the sectarian violence within Iraq.

As described above, the enemy the US faces is not monolithic, nor is it equally committed to defeating the United States. However, evidence suggests that the remainder of the 1.3 billion followers of Islam – who do not fall into one of the above three groups – should be considered not as the enemy, but as the “target audience” for our efforts to terminate this conflict. This audience shares a common Islamic foundation with all Muslims, including the Vanguard. It is this common foundation that the Vanguard exploits in its attempt to move this group to the “violent extremist” end of the commitment scale. In order to better understand this largest of all segments of the global Muslim population and to get a better perspective of the current strategic environment, we need a more detailed overview of Islamic history and culture.

Cultural Background

The pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula was an ungoverned land bounded to the north by the Byzantine Empire, centered in Constantinople (modern day Turkey), and the Sasanian Empire of Persia to the east (modern Iran).²⁶ In order to secure favorable trade routes and resources both empires frequently waged war against each other as well as with the surrounding neighbors. Pre-Islamic Arabia was a violent and chaotic environment, but it also extended unprecedented individual rights and freedoms to its people. Mecca was at the crossroads of these lucrative regional trade routes and was home to many worshipers of Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and numerous pagan cults that demanded human sacrifices.²⁷ Individuals were free to live their lives in any manner they saw fit; they even enjoyed the freedom to choose and frequently change their deities.²⁸ Violence and oppression in the pursuit of wealth was widespread and even pagan gods were not free from the wrath of men.²⁹ Within this environment, it was common for local tribes to trade both allegiances and goods to maximize profits.

Around 570 A.D., Muhammad was born into the Hashim clan, part of the Quraysh tribe that dominated Mecca. Around 610, while meditating in caves outside of Mecca,³⁰ Muhammad began to receive revelations from God through the angel Gabriel. These revelations eventually became the content of Islamic scripture contained in the Quran. For Muslims, this scripture is the final word of God and the foundation of Islam. Muhammad was intent on creating an egalitarian society and bringing peace to Arabia through submission to Islam. He was eventually able to bring order and peace to a chaotic Mecca through combat, by forcing the inhabitants to submit to the will of his one true God.³¹ Following Muhammad’s death in 632, Islam spread very

quickly. Within the next hundred years it penetrated through North Africa and into what is now Southern France.

Islam considers itself as the manifestation of the final unaltered word of God and the one true religion of the entire world. As the continuation of both Judaism and Christianity, it believes itself to be superior to both.³² Although Islam holds in high regard all the prophets of both Judaism and Christianity, it believes that the “People of the Book” (a phrase used in the Quran for Jews and Christians) have strayed from the original teachings of their prophets and need to be brought back into line through Islam.³³ Theologically, Islam is a religion of deeds and works, not salvation through grace and faith. According to Islam, man is neither good nor bad. But man will be judged by God based on his actions on the Day of Judgment. Muslims believe Islam is predestined to be the one true religion of the world because God told Muhammad this was so.³⁴ Therefore, it is the sacred duty of all Muslims to spread this true religion to the rest of the world. In this sense, Islam is undoubtedly expansionistic. Throughout history it has expanded by conquest, peaceful conversion and migration. In growing as a faith as well as geographically, Islam acquired the characteristics of a community, a nation and eventually an empire. The community of Islam is known as the *umma*. It constitutes a borderless nation of believers and considers itself separate from the non-Islamic world. From a practical standpoint, the *umma* includes all the 1.3 billion Muslims throughout the world. Anyplace Muslims live and practice their faith freely is considered part of the Nation of Islam, or *dar-al-Islam*.

Muhammad was the sole leader of this fledgling religion and empire. All decisions, whether spiritual or earthly, were referred to him and were made by means of his connection with the divine. Upon his death in 632, the *umma* was at a loss concerning who should replace their leader. They realized that no one could be the prophet, but that someone needed to lead the community of believers. The initial followers, known as the Companions, selected Muhammad’s father-in-law, Abu Bakr as the first caliph, from the Arabic *khalifa* meaning “successor”.³⁵ After Muhammad’s death, many of the tribes that had submitted to him began to waiver in their support and patronage; they no longer wanted to pay the taxes that had been imposed on them. Abu Bakr responded by sending armed groups on campaigns to force the tribes to pay their taxes and remain part of the faithful. As during Muhammad’s early conquests, these Muslim warriors were motivated by several things. First, they believed that Allah had already determined their death. If they died in a conflict for Allah, they would have instant access to paradise.³⁶ Second, should they survive; they would receive both the spiritual merits of deeds accomplished for Allah and the spoils of war.³⁷ During these campaigns, the Muslims acquired additional allies from the nomadic tribes. Abu Bakr was able to bring the entire

Arabian Peninsula under his control before he died in 634.³⁸ Abu Bakr and his successor Umar ibn al-Khattab were generally supported by the growing Muslim community. However controversy arose over the behavior of third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan.

Uthman was perceived as showing favoritism in decisions regarding the *umma* and was assassinated in 656 by a group of militant Islamic priests known as the Kharijites.³⁹ Ali ibn Abi Talib, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, was then selected over Muawiyah, a relative of Uthman, to be the fourth caliph. This decision greatly divided the community and led to the first Islamic Civil War. The followers of Ali were known as *shait Ali* in Arabic, or more commonly as the Shia or Shiites. The remainder and majority of the *umma* became known as Sunnis, meaning "followers of [the Prophet's] customs."⁴⁰ The Kharijites believed that the only way to end the strife of the Civil War was to assassinate both Ali and Muawiyah. Ali was assassinated in 661, but Muawiyah survived. Consequently, Muawiyah became the fifth caliph.⁴¹ Ali's followers continued to challenge the legitimacy of the caliph. So upon Muawiyah's death in 680 the second Islamic Civil War picked up where the first left off. Muawiyah's son succeeded him and ordered his troops kill Ali's remaining family members. This violent act permanently separated the Shiites and the Sunnis.⁴²

The caliphate embodied the combined power of both church and state as it acquired and administrated new lands. The conquered lands were ruled according to Islamic law, but the inhabitants for the most part were not compelled to convert. However, they were forced to pay special taxes to worship and conduct business until they became Muslims. The conversion of conquered peoples to Islam took many years; it was not until 850 that Muslims were the majority in the empire they had created.⁴³ The reign of the Arab caliphs lasted until 1258, when the Mongols captured Baghdad and executed the last Abbasid caliph. But by then the unity and power of the caliphate had already receded.⁴⁴ After this, the caliphate was contested by numerous competing groups and the caliph was never able to create the unified and egalitarian society that Muhammad had envisioned. The last formal caliphate was finally dissolved with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1924.

Pre-Islamic Arabia had been an ungoverned polytheistic region of competing nomadic tribes and prosperous merchant cities. Muhammad and the Companions, however, had succeeded in consolidating these violent tribes and cities under Islam. During the Middle Ages, Islamic culture led the world in mathematics, science and astronomy. Its empire stretched across three continents. Today there is a growing undercurrent of longing for this idealized distant past. Many Muslims believe that their current troubles are a result of being led astray by disunity, Western influences and a lack of adherence to their pure Islamic teachings.⁴⁵ There is

a substantial body of evidence to indicate that today's Muslims fear that the US and its agenda of democracy and freedom of religion are taking them back to the chaos and violence that Muhammad had quelled.⁴⁶

Root Causes of this Conflict

Terrorism is a tactic to coerce behavioral change in an adversary. But the salient strategic issue is to identify the root causes of terrorism? We are well aware of what terrorists can do, but do we know why they do it? Arguably, there are three root causes. First, the unifying theological doctrine of Islam prescribes that true believers, having submitted to Islam, will receive their portion of the spoils of war and a generous sustenance.⁴⁷ Militant Islam is fueling its war against the United States and the West by exploiting the disenfranchisement and hopelessness of a large portion of the Muslim world based on its prevalent belief that they are being oppressed and deprived of their just benefits from the wealth generated by the Muslim countries' natural resources, principally crude oil. Second, a small but very determined group, the revolutionary Islamic Vanguard, is using the *umma*'s general perception of exploitation by the West to create an ideologically based global insurgency. Lastly, US policy and strategy has created a credibility gap between its words and its actions within the Muslim world.

Spoils of War and Generous Sustenance

It is overly simplistic to assert that poverty alone is the root cause of the terrorism that is plaguing the world today. It is true that a majority of the world's Muslims live in some of the poorest countries as measured by per capita income, however, these countries are also home to some of the world's wealthiest elite. Within the community of Islam (the *umma*), Muhammad set the example of sharing all the resources of the community so that no one would go without. It is a matter of faith to Muslims that the *umma* will take care of all believers. Under Muhammad and his successors, as new lands were conquered the spoils were first divided up among those taking part in the conquest and then a portion was distributed to the rest of the *umma*.

According to the Quran:

*And know that out of all the booty that ye may acquire (in war), a fifth share is assigned to Allah and to the Messenger, and to near relatives, orphans the needy, and the wayfarer... (8:41)*⁴⁸

Muslims today believe that the wealthy oil countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are not using their wealth in accordance to the teachings of Islam. Based on these teachings, they believe that even the lowly shoemaker in Rabat, Morocco, is entitled to his fair portion of the wealth derived from the oil under all Muslims lands.⁴⁹ This borderless community feels betrayed

by those who presume to be Islamic leaders yet who constitute – in Muslim eyes – an exclusive ruling elite which hoards all wealth and power unto itself.

*Such in truth are the Believer: they have grades of dignity with their Lord, and forgiveness, and generous sustenance. (8:4)*⁵⁰

The tradition of the *umma* dictates that the entire community is entitled to their fair portion of the *umma*'s wealth. This sense of betrayal has in recent years been focused on the West – the US in particular – by portraying the US as dictating internal policy to Muslim countries. To deflect attention from internal and external security challenges, these countries have not been quick to dispel those perceptions.

Resentment, Exploitation and Ideology

This sense of betrayal by Muslim Governments has contributed significantly to the general resentment and hatred towards the West - the US specifically. There is also an underlying feeling within the global Muslim community that they are being targeted and kept from uniting in a recreation of the caliphate as it has been romantically envisioned prior to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1924.⁵¹ Since the Muslims have been unable to establish a pan-Islamic government ruled under the divine law of the *sharia*, they tend to believe that the West is seeking to control, oppress and exploit their people and resources. There is indeed some truth in their perception of a US attempt to prevent the establishment of a Caliphate. At a press conference on 13 September 2006, Tony Snow, White House Press Secretary, stated:

...yes, you (the US) want to fight the efforts of bin Laden and others to establish a caliphate. The history of the caliphate was that you had centralized leadership at that time. It had control over the impressive landmass that was controlled by Muslims during that period. And they want to establish that sort of thing. So the President's notion is absolutely right, you want to preempt that.⁵²

According to the Quran, God has already predetermined that Islam is the one true religion destined to rule the world, so it is up to the followers of Muhammad to bring that about or die trying.⁵³ This obligation creates an enormous pool of potential radical followers from within the *umma*, especially when they truly believe that God is on their side. However, there might be a seam within Islam that could be leveraged to a US advantage.

Although in recent years there has been an increase in financial as well as ideological support to promote the reestablishment of the caliphate, these efforts come in the face of historical reality that Islam has traditionally been fragmented and hard to mobilize. However, current support has enabled small groups such as Al Qaeda to become the self-appointed revolutionary Islamic Vanguard. As the Vanguard, it is their task to take the fight to what they

consider the source of the Islamic World's problems -- the US. Al Qaeda's success in defeating the Soviet military in Afghanistan emboldened bin Laden, convincing him that he had found the path to liberating the *umma* from Western oppression and exploitation. By combining a convenient interpretation of Islamic history through selective and literal use of the Quran with large sums of money from supportive Muslims, bin Laden has mobilized a decentralized group of combatants fully committed to their belief in divine Islamic predestination. Bin Laden's vision was to further use his Mujihideen fighters who had forced the Soviets to withdraw from Afghanistan to engage in a holy war or *jihad* against their oppressors. Having experienced only limited success in areas of Chechnya and Kashmir, Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait presented a golden opportunity.

In August 1990, Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait. Bin Laden, a Saudi, offered the King of Saudi Arabia the use of his Mujihideen to defend Saudi Arabia and defeat Saddam Hussein.⁵⁴ The King's precise reasons for not accepting bin Laden's offer are not fully known, but evidently his decision upset bin Laden greatly. When the King brought in US forces to defend Saudi Arabia, bin Laden concluded that he had to remove the Royal family from power. Some believe that even at this early date bin Laden contemplated recreating the Islamic Caliphate in Iraq after defeating Saddam. During the first Gulf War, the Muslim masses tended to support Iraq. They saw the US coming to the defense of Kuwaiti's and Saudi Arabia's leaders, who were regarded as illegitimate because they were perceived as hoarding for themselves the resources that belonged to all Muslims.⁵⁵ As events played out, bin Laden would return to Afghanistan and establish an Islamic *sharia* government under the Taliban.

From Afghanistan, he was able to organize and carry out attacks against US facilities, culminating in the 9/11 attack. Bin Laden was able to use these attacks as a key component of a recruiting campaign to build support for the attainment of his ultimate goal: reestablishment of the Caliphate. The 9/11 attacks demonstrated to the *umma* that a few true believers could in fact change the world. In a sense, he was able to give the oppressed masses hope that there was someone out there listening to their pleas and was willing to die for their interests. The fact that terrorist tactics were used made no difference. The Quran has numerous passages that call for inflicting terror into the hearts of not just the enemy forces but also civilian populations:⁵⁶ "*Soon shall we cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers...*" (3:151).⁵⁷ The Vanguard was standing up in a meaningful and effective way to liberate the *umma* from Western oppression and exploitation.

US Creditability Gap

United States foreign policy has created a credibility gap in the Middle East and globally, especially in Muslim populated countries. This gap has been created by the perceived hypocrisy of the US's words compared to its deeds. The US Government talks about promoting democratic principles, yet the Muslim countries in the Middle East with which the US has positive relations are either monarchies or dictatorships. This credibility gap is also a product of cultural differences. Freedom and democracy do not hold the same meaning in Islamic culture as they do in Western culture. In Islamic culture, freedom and democracy invoke the cultural memory of the chaos of pre-Islamic Arabia with its violence and multiple religions and deities – the very things that Muhammad sought to rid from the land. These terms also bring forth images of unchecked individualism and human sacrifices made to pagan gods.⁵⁸ Islam specifically demands the undivided submission of the individual; it promises peace in exchange for the surrender of individualism in order to build an egalitarian community.⁵⁹ The US has not been able to effectively communicate an understanding of these Western concepts to Muslim mass culture in a way that would have positive value and meaning.⁶⁰ A recent editorial in the Arab News commenting on the Palestinian elections highlights the difficulty the US faces in trying to promote democracy and support its national interests in the region:

Now at least Bush's perverse vision of the democratic process is patently clear. A democratic election must produce a government that is acceptable to the White House. Anything else will be rejected. The democratic voice of the people will be ignored unless it is singing the song that Washington wants to hear. This astounding hypocrisy undermines everything America says it is trying to achieve in the region and everything that America once stood for.⁶¹

This perception of US hypocrisy is compounded by US efforts and rhetoric to enhance the “rule of law” in the region. For the average Muslim, there is only one law – that is *sharia* law, the divine law of God. Muslims don't understand how the US can claim that it supports the rule of law and then support supposed Muslim governments that don't uphold *sharia* law.⁶² The essential complementary component to law is its application, and Muslims want justice to be applied consistently.⁶³ They expect governments and leaders to be “just” and don't understand how the US can support actions by Israel yet condemn Hamas and Hezbollah for similar actions. One of the key causal factors of terrorism has been described as a deeply held sense of injustice.⁶⁴ In a legal context, the term “freedom” means “not being subject to a condition of slavery”. Until recently, it was not used as a descriptor of “good” or “bad” government.⁶⁵ The traditional ideal of good government was one based on “justice”⁶⁶ and the consistent and fair application of laws.

Radical Islamic Strategy

After identifying the enemy, reviewing Islamic cultural background and discussing the root causes of the conflict as well as problems posed by an arguable “credibility gap” in US foreign policy, it is now worthwhile to examine both the strategy of radical Islam and the US strategy, designed to counter it, using the classic ‘End, Ways and Means’ methodology. This comparison will enable us to assess the effectiveness of the US strategy in the GWOT. As discussed earlier, the extremist Muslim threat to the US is not monolithic in nature. However, it can reasonably be divided into two components. The first component is the most violent and visible; it is the threat from the Sunni-based revolutionary Islamic Vanguard lead by Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network. The second component comes from the Shiite based groups such as Hezbollah, with state support from Iran. Both groups seek to reduce the power and influence of the West, specifically the US, in the Middle East region. At times, both groups seem to show a unity of effort, but there is little evidence that indicates they are in fact working together.⁶⁷ This analysis will focus on bin Laden’s *fatwas*, letters and interviews to gain a clearer picture of his Islamic extremist strategy.

Ends: Goals and Objectives

In August 1996, bin Laden issued a *fatwa* that specified three near-term objectives. The first was the need to remove US and Western influence from the Middle East, specifically Saudi Arabia. He states “Clearly after Belief (*imaan*) there is no more important duty than pushing the American enemy out of the holy land.”⁶⁸ Bin Laden went on to explain that he believed that the Saudi King had betrayed the *umma* by allowing the US to base military forces in Saudi Arabia. As a result of this betrayal, the King gave up his right to govern the land. Bin Laden then called for his removal as the second objective. The third objective was the removal of Israel from Jerusalem.⁶⁹

The ultimate goal of Islam can best be described as the eventual establishment of a single nation or community of Islam governed by the rule of *sharia* law -- in essence, the reestablishment of the Caliphate. It is important to note that, by definition, the Caliphate is a theocratic entity in which the state is fused with religion. The 1979 Iranian revolution was the first step in the Shiite fulfillment of this objective; however, the Iranian *sharia* government has not been described in Caliphic terms and its authority has not been recognized by the Sunnis.

Ways: Concepts and Implementation

In order to accomplish the ends that the revolutionary Islamic Vanguard has identified, the Islamic extremists must match their ways with the available means. The ways used by al

Qaeda and similar organizations can be looked at through the lens of the traditional “DIME” approach, that is, their application of Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic (DIME) elements of power to achieve their strategic goals.

They have used very little diplomacy. The issuing of *fatwas* and bin Laden’s repeated calls for the US to leave the Middle East illustrate the extent to which al Qaeda has used the diplomatic element of power. Indirectly, al Qaeda has been able to create diplomatic fissures between the US and its allies. The Madrid bombings that extensively resulted in Spain withdrawing its troops from Iraq are one example.⁷⁰

The use of the Information element of power has been extensively and effectively used by the Vanguard. With only limited military means, this enemy has adopted ways that maximize its effects. So bin Laden has effectively leveraged the media as a key weapon in this war. As early as bin Laden’s 1996 *fatwa*, he called for information operations “to spread rumours, fear and discouragement among the members of the enemy forces.”⁷¹ The *fatwa*’s themselves can be considered a form of information operations with the primary intent of rallying the *umma* to the cause. The use of the internet and the growth of extremist websites from dozens in 1998 to 4000-6000 in 2003⁷² demonstrates the effectiveness of the Vanguard’s use of the information element of power. In addition, the US and Western media – in their watch dog role – have tended to side with, if not unwittingly support, many of the Vanguard’s aims. The Vanguard’s exercise of information power is not solely directed at the US, but also at moderate Muslims in an attempt to provoke them to take up arms and join the cause. A key element of the Vanguard’s information operations has been the development of an ideological message that combines direct quotes from the Quran with the implication that the US and West are the cause of all of Islam’s “problems”. To this end, these messages attempt to legitimize the actions taken in the name of Islam and create a tangible scapegoat against which to focus action. It is important to recognize however, that not all of these information effects are coming from the Vanguard. A large portion is also coming from states such as Saudi Arabia in the form of the teachings at *madrasses* and the mosques they finance, build and support around the world.⁷³

Bin Laden understood even before his 1996 *fatwa* that he had very limited military power available to him. During the Afghanistan campaign against the Soviets, he was dependent on the funding and weapons supplied by the US and Saudi Arabia. Taking a page from Mao and the Chinese revolution, Bin Laden called upon all Muslims in his 1996 *fatwa* to “initiate a guerrilla warfare”⁷⁴ to force the US out of the Middle East. He further explained that “due to the imbalance of power between our armed forces and the enemy forces, a suitable means of fighting must be adopted i.e. using fast moving light forces that work under complete secrecy.”⁷⁵

Two years later bin Laden issued his second *fatwa* to remind Muslims of their duty to God. He specified a duty: “to kill the Americans and their allies -- civilians and military -- is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it.”⁷⁶ To this end, the attacks on the US and its allies have increased in intensity from the Khobar Towers in June 1996, to the African Embassy Bombings in August 1998, to bombing the USS Cole in October 2000 and finally to the attacks of 11 September 2001.⁷⁷ In a message attributed to the al Qaeda military commander, Sayf Al Adl, in May 2005, Al Adl claims the “ultimate objective [of the 9/11 attacks] was to prompt the United States to come out of its hole and to provoke the United States into attacking areas of the Islamic world.”⁷⁸ The concept was to provoke a disproportionate US military response that would have the strategic effect of waking up the “slumbering nation of Islam,” rallying it to the cause of attacking the US and the West.⁷⁹ The objective of killing US forces was to create unacceptable US losses, in terms of both dollars and lives, in an attempt to break the will of the American people and force the removal of US forces and influence from the Middle East. This appears to be part of what is currently happening in Iraq.

Bin Laden had a solid understanding of how to use the various types of power available to him. As a non-state actor, his ability to apply economic power was limited, but not wholly neglected. In his 1996 *fatwa* he called for all Muslims to boycott American goods,⁸⁰ thereby creating economic sanctions against the US. This indicates that he clearly understood the potential of economic power when coordinated with the other elements of power.

Means: Resources

The resources available to the Vanguard in this conflict can be grouped into four categories: a large Muslim population, a unifying religious ideology, global communications and the support of nation states that have an interest in a weaker US.

Although the revolutionary Islamic Vanguard has very limited military means, it does have a vast population of 1.3 billion Muslims who could be potential participants in, or at least supporters in its fight to reestablish the Caliphate. Even if it could only recruit one percent of that population, that number would constitute 1.3 million people, a large army with which to wage an asymmetric Islamic revolutionary war. Within the *umma*, the persistent underlying feeling of resentment, frustration and hopelessness is a potential “gold mine” for the Vanguard to exploit and focus the *umma*’s energy on their “common enemy.” Adolph Hitler and his Nazi Party met “with great success” by claiming all the ills of the German people were the fault of the Jews. Hitler’s ability to focus the attention of the population on a scapegoat allowed him to

concentrate national power within himself and the Nazi Party to dominate Europe. Al Qaeda is attempting to tap into the vast potential of the Muslim population much the same way. Just as Hitler used nationalism and the rhetoric of a master race, the Vanguard is using Islam and ideology as the unifying force to achieve its ends. This ideology has the potential to inspire intensely misguided dedication in individuals who truly believe that if they die doing Allah's work they will go straight to heaven, no matter what else they may have done or not done in their lives.⁸¹ The historical implications of Muhammad's legacy are not lost on al Qaeda or the rest of the Muslim world.

Global communications have been a tremendous resource for all of these radical groups. The internet has given them the ability to reach out and touch Muslims in any nation. As stated by Ayman al-Zawahiri, an al Qaeda leader, "In the absence of popular support, the Islamic mujahed movement would be crushed in the shadows, far from the masses who are distracted or fearful."⁸² The internet has given these groups the means to raise money, communicate with geographically separated units and promulgate their message to the world. Indeed, charity is a key Islamic obligation; it provides a means to generate and collect money that is then used to conduct military operations.

The final resource that is available to these radical groups is the nation-states that have similar objectives. Nations such as China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and possibly even some European nations may find benefit from the removal, or at least weakening, of US presence and power in the Middle East. Also, it must be considered that as the economic face of the world changes, even some countries that had previously been US allies may desire a weakened United States. There should be no doubt that these radical Islamic groups have the Ways and Means to achieve their desired Ends.

US Strategy

The US articulated its strategy for this conflict in February 2003 (updated it in September 2006) entitled "The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism." Prior to the events of 9/11, transnational terrorism was considered a law enforcement problem. Following the 11 September attacks, al Qaeda and other like-minded groups have been redefined as radical ideological movements with revolutionary ambitions.⁸³ The fact that there was no overall coherent US strategy for dealing with this type of threat prior to 9/11, delayed the unified national efforts to deal with an enemy that had declared war on the US three years before and that had already carried out several attacks against the US and its global interests.

Ends: Goals and Objectives

The current US strategy describes two macro-level strategic visions. The first and short-term goal is to kill or capture those individuals that have irrevocably crossed the line into violent extremism. The second and long-term goal is to create a global environment that is inhospitable to these and future violent extremists.⁸⁴ This vision thus identifies the Ends that the US would like to achieve with this strategy. The long-term goal requires “winning the battle of ideas”⁸⁵ by creating the conditions that give people hope for the future. It is this “ideological battle” that is vital to eliminating – or at a minimum severely curtailing – the pool of potential recruits available to the radical groups at war with the US and the West.

Ways: Concepts and Implementation

The current US strategy has identified six key actions necessary to achieve these Ends identified. These six actions employ all the DIME instruments of national power.

1. Prevent attacks by terrorist networks
2. Deny weapons of mass destruction to rogue states and terrorist allies who seek to use them
3. Deny terrorists the support and sanctuary of rogue states
4. Deny terrorists control of any nation they would use as a base and launching pad for terror
5. Advance effective democracies as the long-term antidote to the ideology of terrorism
6. Lay the foundations and build the institutions and structures we need to carry the fight forward against terror and help ensure our ultimate success.⁸⁶

The first four actions support the short-term objective and have largely been pursued through kinetic means. The US strategy has arguably been successful in capturing and killing members of al Qaeda and preventing further attacks within the US. However, the kinetic execution of this strategy has resulted in the deaths of thousands of Muslim civilians who were probably not committed to the extremist’s jihad. The UN estimates that over 34,000 Iraqis died in 2006 alone.⁸⁷ The last two actions directly support the long-term goal of creating an environment that will be inhospitable to the extremists. The initial steps toward this end have been taken by establishing and maintaining international standards of accountability for national governments. Under the auspices of the United Nations twelve conventions and protocols have been developed that obligate governments to stem terrorist activities and to share information of value to winning the GWOT.⁸⁸ The US has also taken actions to strengthen coalitions and partnerships to help maintain a united front against terrorism.⁸⁹ As the US builds partnerships with many nations, the terrorists will find themselves more and more isolated from the rest of the

world, theoretically depriving them of the resources they need to carry out their extremist agenda.

Means: Resources

The resources available to the US for this conflict are vast compared to the enemy's – and to most of our allies. For comparison, the total GDP for Saudi Arabia in 2005 was \$346B, but for the US it was \$12.3T.⁹⁰ Between September 2001 and 1 October 2006, Congress has appropriated an estimated \$432 billion for the Global War on Terrorism.⁹¹ The Department of Defense (DoD) received the majority of these appropriations, over \$390 billion (90.7%), while the State Department (DoS) received around \$40 billion (9.3%). With the majority of the funding, DoD has focused on the short-term objectives, while the DoS has worked toward the long-term efforts needed in the region. Another key resource that is much harder to estimate – and appropriate – is the will of the US population. While the will of the people does not change quickly, once it does the country as a democracy will also change policies in accordance with the people's will.

Recommendations

The global war on terrorism is an ideological battle. Our enemy is a group of violent religious extremists who are trying to unify Islam under their banner. The nature and circumstances of this war make it one that the US cannot win militarily. Two objectives are identified in the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism: defeat violent extremism and create a global environment inhospitable to violent extremists are the correct ends. However, the US may be failing to apply appropriate ways and means to achieve these goals. The US has clearly demonstrated the capability to find and eliminate the most violent of terrorists, but does it have the capability to create a future global environment that will be inhospitable to violent extremism? The nation's current policies and actions may in fact be creating more, not fewer extremists.

The culture and history of Islam are very important for understanding how to establish a global environment that will be inhospitable to these groups. A clear understanding of this culture and history is essential to the informed crafting of a long-term strategy to shape the future of US and Western interactions with Muslims and Muslim governments. A principal focus of this strategy must be to establish among the *umma* the credibility of the US and its policy. This Strategic Research Paper proposes two recommendations that will help shape that future: First, the US must be seen as “just” to reestablish its credibility and legitimacy in the Islamic

world. Second, the US must communicate and promote democracy in terms that the Islamic world understands and respects.

The US has been losing credibility with the Islamic world slowly and steadily; US credibility has hit a low point as the insurgency in Iraq has intensified. The absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the principle justification for the invasion, was a major contributor to this decline in credibility. In addition, our support for governments that are seen as tyrants and oppressors of the *umma* is further reducing US credibility and impeding achievement of our strategic ends in this conflict. In order to achieve its long-term objective of creating an inhospitable environment for violent extremists through the creation of democratic institutions in nation-states, the US must consistently focus its reform efforts on those predominately Islamic nations with which it already has relationships. While the terms democracy and freedom are currently problematic for Muslims, they do arguably have a universal understanding of justice. In essence, in “packaging” its objective of spreading democratic institutions as a means of reducing or interdicting the manpower flow to the “Vanguard,” the US must find a way to shape its policies and relationships with Middle Eastern governments in a way that focuses on the just and equitable application of those policies. To repair its credibility, the US must focus on applying just practices. The US must hold the Israelis, the Saudis, the Egyptians and itself accountable to standards and policies perceived amongst mainstream Muslims as being consistent. Specifically, the US must recognize democratically elected governments such as Hamas and actively engage them in public diplomacy, even if it disagrees with them. It has been noted that the government and the constitution of Iran contains some of the most progressive democratic institutions in the Islamic world, with no precedent in Islamic history.⁹² In Islamic eyes, here is a democratic Muslim nation that the US considers part of the “Axis of Evil”. United States policies must find common ground with Iran to engage in positive, constructive dialogue. To reestablish its credibility in the Islamic world, the US must actively and forcefully broker a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Without a resolution there, this protracted dispute will continually be the flame that ignites the region. The difficulty and precariousness of these tasks does not make their accomplishment any less necessary.

To bring about effective strategic ideological change, the US must bring the democratic experience down to the common shop keeper in the market – and more importantly to school age Muslim children of future generations. The challenge will be to penetrate a largely xenophobic society without further alienating it. Freedom and democracy do not have the same understanding to most Muslims as they do for most Westerners. Muslims’ fear of returning to pre-Islamic chaos must be taken into account as the US crafts and advances its policies. This

will be a significant challenge that will require the US to overcome its cultural bias against combining religion with policy. For the vast majority of Muslims, there is no understanding of or tolerance for the separation of Church and State; yet for the majority of Americans there is no appreciation of how the two can be combined.

The US needs to engage in a focused effort to work with the existing Middle East governments to educate their populations in the roles and responsibilities that come with having a voice in the government. Ideally this should start in grade school and with the establishment of local democratically run civic and government organizations. The US must realize that positive change will not come overnight. However, as individuals learn how democracy works at the local level, they will be able to build a sufficient constituency to support the foundation of a national democratic government. Culturally as well as historically, Muslims have selected leaders by consensus; Islamic democracy will surely account for these tribal sheiks and their historic role in governance. Al Qaeda and other radical groups claim that democracy and Islam are incompatible, but a democracy can be formed to take into account both divine law and popular sovereignty.⁹³ The US must enable nations to tailor their development of democracy to fit their local needs. They may not develop a democracy that the US is used to, but downtown Kabul does not look like Peoria.

United States foreign policies must support our vision of the future. Further relationships will determine how the US deals with Islam and Muslim nations, but the groundwork for productive relationships can be laid now. Islamic web sites claim Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. Even if it is not, it still has a large following and an expansive future. The basic tenets of Islam foster the spread of the religion, either by conquest or migration. Sooner or later, the US is going to have to decide if it can live with Islamic expansion or not. This will largely depend on whether that expansion can be shaped into a benign event.

Endnotes

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